WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A communications method for transferring electronic data between users of a communications system, the method comprising:

    delivering an e-mail message from a sender to at least one recipient; and

    upon opening of the e-mail message by the recipient, indicating the online state of one or more of the sender and any other recipient of the e-mail message.

2. The method of claim 1 further comprising sending a message to at least one of the sender and any other recipient based on the online state.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein the message comprises an instant message.

4. The method of claim 2 wherein the message comprises an e-mail message.

5. The method of claim 4 wherein the e-mail message comprises an invitation to join the communications system.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein indicating the online state comprises displaying a graphical user interface to the recipient.

7. The method of claim 6 wherein the graphical user interface comprises an icon positioned next to an e-mail address in the e-mail message.

8. The method of claim 1 wherein indicating the online state comprises indicating whether the sender is online, offline, or not a member of the communications system.

9. The method of claim 1 wherein indicating the online state comprises accepting a request to check user online state.

10. The method of claim 9 wherein the request comprises at least one e-mail address.

11. The method of claim 9 wherein the request comprises an Internet protocol.

23

1   12. The method of claim 11 wherein the Internet protocol is hypertext transfer

2   protocol.

1   13. The method of claim 9 wherein the request is initiated by a client of the user.

1   14. The method of claim 9 further comprising sending a redirection command based

2   on the online state.

1   15. The method of claim 14 wherein the redirection command comprises a uniform

2   resource locator.

1   16. The method of claim 1 wherein indicating the online state comprises establishing

2   a persistent connection to an instant messaging server.

1   17. The method of claim 1 wherein indicating the online state comprises checking a

2   control port.

1   18. A computer program for transferring electronic data between users of a

2   communications system, the computer program being stored on a computer readable

3   medium and comprising instructions for:

4   delivering an e-mail message from a sender to at least one recipient;

5   upon opening of the e-mail message by the recipient, indicating the online state of at

6   least one of the sender and any other recipient of the e-mail message.

1   19. The computer program of claim 18 wherein the computer readable medium

2   comprises a disc.

1   20. The computer program of claim 18 wherein the computer readable medium

2   comprises a client device.

1   21. The computer program of claim 18 wherein the computer readable medium

2   comprises a host device.

1   22. The computer program of claim 18 wherein the computer readable medium

2   comprises a propagated signal.

1   23. A communications apparatus for transferring electronic data between users

2   of a communications system, the apparatus configured to:

3   deliver an e-mail message from a sender to at least one recipient;

4   upon opening of the e-mail message by the recipient, indicate the online state of at

5   least one of the sender and any other recipient of the e-mail message.

1   24. The communications apparatus of claim 23 wherein the communications

2   apparatus comprises a client device.

1   25. The communications apparatus of claim 23 wherein the communications

2   apparatus comprises a host device.

1   26. A communications apparatus for transferring electronic data between users

2   of a communications system, the method comprising:

3   delivering means for delivering an e-mail message from a sender to at least one

4   recipient; and

5   indicating means for indicating the online state of at least one of the sender and any

6   other recipient of the e-mail message upon opening of the e-mail message by the recipient.

25